Life's Extras

by

Archibald Rutledge

LIFE'S EXTRAS

BOOKS BY

ARCHIBALD RUTLEDGE

Life's Extras
Children of Swamp and Wood
Days Off in Dixie
Heart of the South
Old Plantation Days
Under the Pines
Plantation Game Trails
Songs from a Valley
South of Richmond
The Banners of the Coast
Collected Poems
The Flower of Hope
It Will be Daybreak Soon
My Colonel and His Lady
Rain on the Marsh
An American Hunter
Home by the River
Veiled Eros
Brimming Chalice
Sonnets

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BY

ARCHIBALD RUTLEDGE

Sketches by

B. HAY GILBERT

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For Florence,
My life's best extra

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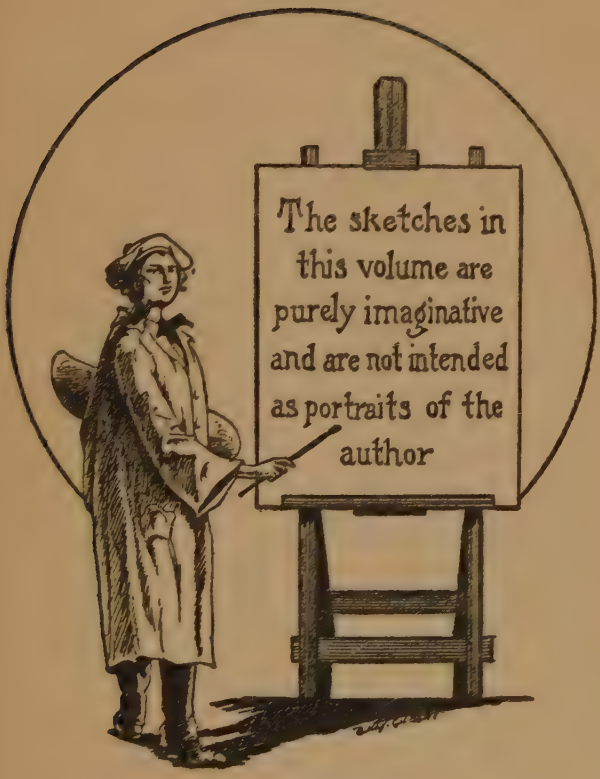

The sketches in
this volume are
purely imaginative
and are not intended
as portraits of the
author

I

FAITH IN GOD'S LOVE

"I am absolutely unshaken in my faith that God created us, loves us, and wants us not only to be good but to be happy."

The train that was speeding across the autumn landscape
B. Hay Gilbert

I

FAITH IN GOD'S LOVE

MY casual acquaintance on the train that was speeding across the autumn landscape seemed thoughtful, reflective, a little wistful as we talked about the things we saw from the car window. At last we came to a big meadow wherein were grazing half a hundred beef cattle. I said something inane about the prosperity of the country, the glowing future of the live-stock industry, and so forth. "Look at those little daisies," he said, pointing to a bright patch of them in a far corner of the meadow. "Many people think them useless, beneath their notice. Materially they are, but spiritually they are priceless; for they manifest a Power that understands the hunger of our souls for beauty, for 'the city not made with hands.' And that Power

MERE CATTLE CANNOT GREATLY THRILL ME

generously and sensitively supplies it. Somehow," he added, "mere cattle and the solid abundance of money and food that they represent cannot greatly thrill me. There is more hope for humanity in a wild flower than in tons of beef."

Long after he left me, I kept thinking of what he had said, wondering just what he had meant. His idea, of course, was that a wild flower is one of life's extras, one of those things that we do not *have* to have but which we enjoy all the more for that very reason.

The more I thought about this, the more it appeared that Creation supplies us with only two kinds of things: necessities and extras. Sunlight, air, water, food, shelter—these are among the bare necessities. With them we can exist. But moonlight and starlight are distinctly extras; so are music, the perfumes, flowers. The wind is perhaps a necessity; but the song that it croons through the morning pines is a different thing.

The fascinating part about all this is not the tabulating of life's necessities and life's extras; it is rather the question, Who put them here, and for what purpose? Further-

more, shall we not find, through some stories of personal experience, that the curious and significant remark of my casual acquaintance was right? I do not presume that my actual living this mortal life has in any way been unique, especially as regards this matter of life's extras; yet, if I can tell what they have meant to me, I shall perhaps be voicing the experience and the hope of many.

I remember one October night visiting a friend who was lying very sick. There was a full moon that night; and as I walked down the village street on my sad mission I felt the silvery beauty of it quiet my heart. The world lay lustrous. There was no scrawny bush nor ugly clod that was not transfigured in that glory. A little breeze over the brimming salt tide brought aromatic marshy odors. It seemed to me that some power was trying to make beauty take away my sadness. I found my friend not less aware than I was of the beauty of the night. He could look from his window and see the argent glamour of it all: how it flooded the gleaming tide with celestial lights; how it ran long white lances through the swarthy cedars; how

As I sat beside him

it tinged with soft radiance the locusts and the mimosas. He felt the breeze too, and delighted in the odours that it brought of the happy world beyond his window. To my surprise, although he was very ill, he greeted me with a strangely elevated calmness and joy.

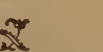
"I have been," he said, "in many waters, and they are still deep all about me. But God has been with me too. He has not failed me in my distress. Who but He could send this moonlight and this mocking bird singing He brought them to me, and I think they bring Him near."

As I sat beside him, a mocking bird began to sing in the moonlight, chanting divinely. I know the song reached our spirits. On the table by the bed were all the neces-

sities for a sick man; but he had small comfort from them. But the moonlight, and the hale fragrances, and the wild song of the bird—these brought peace to his heart.

Long afterward he said to me, "Do you remember that night? I thought it would be my last. But from the time the bird-song came through that window I felt that I would get well. I don't talk much about these things, but I felt that all that beauty and peace were really the love of God. I guess He does not love us with words: He loves us by giving us everything we need—in every way."

It must be as he said.



At any rate, I know that a thoughtful consideration of life's extras has done more to give my faith in God actual conviction than all the sermons I ever heard. My knowledge of theology is hardly more ample than that of a bushman of Borneo; but I am absolutely unshaken in my faith that God created us, loves us, and wants us not only to be good but to be happy. He min-

I was sure that GOD had done that

isters to our bodies by the necessities that abound in the world; and to our spirits by the beauty that adorns creation. One has no difficulty in discovering, in the vast scheme of things, an extraordinary, an exciting, provision and prevision. As philosophy, I know not if this will stand; but I do know that a belief in it has brought me close to God.

I cannot regard the "fiery funeral of foliage old" as accidental, nor the gorgeous pageantry of sunset as anything but the manifestation of divine art. I stood recently on the shores of a mountain lake at sundown after a heavy rain, and watched for an hour the magnificence of the west; the huge clouds smoldering, the long lanes of emerald light between them, then isolated clouds like red roses climbing up some oriel window of the sky, the deep refulgence behind it all. Superb as it was, momently it changed, so that I saw in reality a score of sunsets. I looked across the lonely, limpid lake, past the dark forest, far into the heart of the flaming, fading skies. I was sure that God had done that; moreover, that He had done it for a

purpose. When did He ever do anything idly? And what was the purpose? Surely to fill the hearts of his children with a sense of beauty and of awe, and to teach them of His loving care.

Neither a day-dawning nor a sunset (with all its attendant beauty) is really a necessity. It is one of life's extras. It is a visit to an incomparable art gallery; and no one has to pay any admission fee. The human mind, being somewhat proud and perverse, may be inclined to reject this kind of proof of God's love. But the human heart can hardly do so. And in things spiritual I do not know but that the heart is by far the better guide.

II

THE ELOQUENCE OF SIMPLE PEOPLE

"I have always loved the eloquence of simple people. What they say, coming from the heart, often goes straight to the heart."

I noticed
that the
rhododendrons
were in blossom

II

THE ELOQUENCE OF SIMPLE PEOPLE

NOT long ago, I visited a lonely cabin in the North Carolina mountains, whence the owner had just been taken, charged with murder. He and a neighbor had had a fatal altercation about a line fence, and he had "drawn" more quickly than the other. The accused had borne a good reputation up to this time. Both men had seen service in France. I was rather well acquainted with both families.

As I went up the old gullied mountain road toward the home of the first, I noticed in the wild glen, down which a white stream gurgled and spurted, incessant, vehement, and joyous, that the rhododendrons were

in blossom. There may be a more beautiful flower, but I have not seen it—taking it all in all, and considering the wildwood setting

in which it invariably grows. To look at this wondrous flower and not to feel that God exquisitely designed it, and did it not merely as a vagrant artist but with precision and nobility of purpose is to me incredible. Ere long I reached the cabin, and one of the man's sisters greeted me and talked with me. Over the humble mantel I saw a crude little photograph of him in his uniform; and beside it, in a small bottle that functioned as a vase, I saw a sprig of rhodo-

dendron blossom. I looked at the picture; then I said something casual about the flower.

"I don't know why," my hostess said, "but to have it there helps me. It 'minds me of God."

I have always loved the eloquence of simple people. What they say, coming from the heart, often goes straight to the heart. "It 'minds me of God." I never see a rhododendron without remembering that. And are not all of life's extras reminders of the love and the yearning compassion of God?

I mentioned sunsets and sunrises as extras. Almost the whole complex and wonderful matter of color in the world seems an extra. The color of the sky might have been a dingy gray, or a painful yellow, or a plum-colored purple. But it is sapphire; and my philosophy makes me believe that such a color for the sky is by no means the result of mere chance. Granted that it is the result of the operation of certain laws, forces, and conditions; yet behind it all, back of the realized dream, is the mighty intelligence of the Creator, the vast amplitude of the dreamer's

my hostess said,
"but to have it there helps me. It minds me of God."

comprehension. And let us not forget that the two colors at which we can gaze longest are blue and green. There is about them a coolness, a serenity, a spirit of fragrant peace. And as the blue prevails in the sky, the green does upon earth.

X

I have often heard people say that they would like to remake the world. Well, I am glad that we don't have to live in a man-made world. If we consider merely the least of the marvelous provisions for our comfort and our happiness, we can realize how impossible would be an earth and a scheme of life that man had made. And we should feel, also, that David was right: "For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward them that fear Him."

How high is the heaven? Illimitable. And so is God's love.

To a sophisticated person, this sort of belief may seem too child-like. Yet I have the gravest suspicions of sophistication. I have never discovered it in nature; and to me it seems that instead of being a proof of enlightenment and culture, it is the evidence rather of ignorance, and perhaps of folly. It is the triumph of shallowness and sterility. The real trouble with a sophisticated person is that he knows too much, not that he knows too little.

III

GOD WORKS IN WONDERFUL WAYS

"He 'redeemeth thy life from destruction,' says the Psalmist; "but we do not often think of the wonderful ways in which God works."

III

GOD WORKS IN WONDERFUL WAYS

PROBABLY everyone has had some kind of experience with a star, or with the stars. I mean that, at some moment, a star has risen, or has been seen, or has set amid circumstances that made the memory of it a part of one's life. I remember that the morning star I used to see blazing above the plantation pines, when I was up early to feed the stock, or to be about some other work, used to thrill me with the beauty of its startling radiance. It seemed all dewy and throbbing—a thing alive, glorious and immortal. God set it there, I felt, as a reminder of His presence, so that we might begin our day with the thought of Him. So when the eve-

ning came, a great beacon of the twilight reminds us of Him again. Our days and nights are sentineled by the splendid warders of God.

While the boundary separating man from the creatures of nature must be admitted to be shadowy, yet of certain things we can be sure,—things that differentiate us from the lower orders of creation. And since these are not absolutely necessary to life, they may justly be considered extras, conferred on man alone. I am thinking of sentiment, tenderness of heart, "these thoughts that wander through eternity," the gift of laughter. There is no laughter in the natural world. Surely the power to appreciate beauty is an extra, and the capacity to wonder; moreover, God supplies us with what constantly awakens the sensitive heart to wonder: a setting star, blueberry bells, the old renown of some massive patriarch tree, the grace of heart of a friend, royal Orion rising from the sea.

I realize that we live in a time when force seems to be the prevailing power in the world; but it is always temporary. The finer

things that make the good life are not subject to change. We may go off the gold standard; but the man or woman with a heart of gold always stands above par in value.

All spiritual qualities appear to me to be extras: generosity, aspiration, courage beyond the call of duty, and the love that outlasts the years. These things did not just happen; they could not appear in an accidental world. They were so ordered by the Hand Divine which made our spirits what they are, and tenderly ministers to their needs.

Faith is one of life's extras. We do not need it to live; but it is essential to the development of our spirits. It is the covenant which, if kept with God, will keep our pathway clear and our feet from falling. Life is instinct with mystery; but that very fact makes faith both rich and necessary. Perhaps I can best express my faith through nature to God in these lines:

Though I cannot understand,
Yet I trust and I believe

From the same Almighty Hand
All the stars their law receive,
Giving sun and moon their rounds,
And the flaming comet bounds.
Where the ponderous planets roll
Is the same divine control
That I feel within my soul.
To this dim resistless wand
Multitudinous worlds respond;
And the Love that sways Arcturus
And the mightier stars beyond
Makes the shore the wild sea's yoke,
From the acorn rears the oak;
Lifts the wild flower's fragile grace,
Holds the thunder in his place,
Moors the darkly massive mountain
To his granite-tenoned base.
And the Master over these
For my heart a mandate holds
As for burning Betelguese.
All the ancient music golden,
All the august silence olden
Of the far primeval rhythm
In deep harmony's unholden
By the Will that never alters,
By the Hand that never falters.

I once had a curious experience with a star. I was driving home to the planta-

tion, in the old motorless days, when I was overtaken at dusk by a storm of hurricane violence. Inky darkness shrouded the world. I could not even see the road ahead or behind. The thunder and lightning were appalling. Finally, a bolt struck a pine not twenty feet from my buggy. My horse had stood a good deal from this storm; but now he made a sudden dash. He broke away through the forest, and I could not hold him. In a moment he had run between two pines standing close together, had smashed both shafts, and had torn loose from the buggy and from me. Into the howling darkness he vanished.

The rain came down as if it meant to make a joke of the Flood. The thunder blared. The lightning became most uncomfortably intimate and intrusive. I heard near me great trees go crashing down in the fury of the tempest. Alone I was, defenseless, in profound darkness. I knew in a way where I was, and to locate myself the better I looked toward what I believed to be the west.

Through the heavy arras of the rain, to my amazement, I saw a little rift in the

Its light reminded
me of something past
our world
B. HAY. GILBERT

storm-rack, hardly bigger than my hand, in the very heart of which the evening star gleamed in dewy-silver solitude. In all the stillness of felicity it shone serenely, saying to my heart, "This storm is an impostor. It is momentary. The sky is here, and the stars; all shall be well."

Amid all the desolation about me, and the seemingly hopeless chaos, here came a celestial message. Shining through the storm-rack, its light reminded me of something past our world. Taking heart, I waded out to the road, found my horse waiting for me half a mile down its gleaming length, rode homeward through the breaking storm, and reached the house in full, calm starlight. Stars fill me with a

sense of God; and the heart cannot help being grateful when it remembers that the beauty and the wonder of them may be accounted things not to enable us to exist, but gifts of love to make us joyous.

If there is anything in life in which I take a pardonable pride, it is in my friendship for certain old woodsmen and hunters; obscure men, as far as the world is concerned, but faithful friends, loyal comrades. Occasionally one will tell me something intimate about himself; and when he does it is usually remarkable, as I believe the following story is. I shall give it without embellishment.

"It happened last June," my friend told me, as we were sitting together on a pine log in the depths of a virgin forest. "I tell it to you," he said, "because I know if you tell it, you will never use my name. Bill Moore and I, you see, had had trouble between us for years. The last time we met in town, if friends hadn't separated us we would have finished the thing right there. A lot of things had made us feel as we did; and everything that happened appeared to make it worse.

"After that night in town, I figured that one of us would get the other. I knew he always carried a gun, and I began to do the same. Well, that day in June one of the field hands told me that Bill said he would get me. I made up my mind to meet him a little more than halfway, and late that afternoon I rode up toward Bill's house, about three miles from mine, intending to have the thing over. A man can't live in that kind of suspense.

"A mile from his house, I saw somebody coming down the road. The man was riding too, and he looked like Bill. I just turned off the road into one of these here bay-branches, where I would be hid well. There I sat still on my horse, with the bushes all around me, and with my hand on my gun and the devil in my heart. I put up my left hand to pull aside a little limb, when on it I saw a white flower, a sweet bay flower. And I smelt it, too. My mother used to love that flower; and when I was a boy she made me bring a bush from the swamp and plant it in the yard for her. She was buried with one of them same white

I put
up my
left
hand to
pull aside
a little limb

flowers in her hand. And, you know, I forgot all about why I had come down that road.

"You'll think I was a fool, but that flower set me to thinking about my mother, and about them old days, and about the kind of man she hoped I might be when she was gone. The first thing I knew the man on horseback was right opposite me in the road. And it was Bill, all right.

"But in the few minutes he had taken to come up, something had happened to me. I didn't want to harm him now. I didn't feel that I had to look out for myself. Perhaps I did a risky thing, but I rode out of the bushes, calling to him.

"'Bill,' I told him when we were near, 'what is the use of our fighting? Our folks were always friends, and life is short. I don't know as anybody ever gained anything by quarreling with another who ought to be his friend. I want to forgive and forget it all. Shake hands with me, Bill.'

"Something in the way I came up to him made him think it was all right. And it was all right, 'cause we made it up right there and

then; and we are better friends than ever we were before anything happened. Now what do you think of that—and all because of a derned little flower. But it's all the truth, just as I'm telling you."

He "redeemeth thy life from destruction," says the Psalmist; but we do not often think of the deft and beautiful ways in which God works. Beauty is made to touch the heart, a right spirit is renewed, and the life is redeemed. I don't think this is preaching; I hope not, for of all men I am the least capable or worthy to undertake that. It just seems to me like a rehearsal of truth. Surely life's extras not only give us happi-

ness in a positive way but also indirectly; by saving us from the tragic loss of our nobler instincts, they rescue us in times of peril.

IV

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

"I know well the aspect of that Veil which mortal sight cannot pierce. But I know, also, that the spiritual luxuries we so freely enjoy vindicate the faith that behind the Veil is the God of mercy and of tenderest love."

IV

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

THERE are very few sounds in the natural world that are harsh. Even the massive rolling of thunder has about it something of solemn beauty. In anthems the sea rolls on the beach; and in the sunny shallows there are water-harps forever making melodies. The wind is a chorister. Many a wild bird can warble like an aerial rivulet. The world is really a melodious place, full of soft sounds and harmony. Man makes it riotous and blatant.

I remember being especially impressed with this truth when I went one day into the forest to try to escape from a grief that had come to me—the loss of one dearly beloved.

A little way within the borders of that fragrant, dewy forest, where giant yellow pines, tall as the masts of brigantines and full of dim contralto music in their crowns, rejoiced in the sunshine—just here I heard a parula-warbler singing. He was in the crest of a bald cypress, high over the dreamy waters of a little woodland lake. The bird's song sounded like a delicate astral flute, sounded softly and sweetly, to lure me out of my trouble. High in the heavenly blue this chorister was, joyous in the halcyon repose that the heart enjoys when it is at peace. Like a voice of a spirit was this music; it came to me calmly yet thrillingly. Like a quieting hand was that beautiful song, to cool the fever of care, to still the pulse's leap.

All about me were the rejoicing looks of the flowers, and the shining hush and loveliness of dew-hung ferns and bushes, and the gentle, pure passion of the sunlight. And music there was from myriads of sources: gossamer lyrics from bees; the laughter of a little stream jesting with the roots of a mighty pine. The wind's soft wand touched

God seemed
very near to me in that wood

the tall grasses and the sweet myrtles into a sibilant elfin choir. Everywhere I looked I saw wild, sequestered grace. The great pines chanted like the sea, their harps of the sky touched like things celestial. And what did the music and the beauty, those extras, bring me? Passing from a state of keenest grief I came to one of quiet reconcilement—to the profound conviction that, living or dying, God will take care of us.

God seemed very near to me in that wood; the beauty of it all trembled with His grace; the music held His voice. I saw there both life and death—in the green leaves and the brown, in the standing trees and the fallen. If one is honest with himself when he asks the question, What is it that perishes? he will be obliged to answer, Everything that the eye sees. In the forest, amid those things that God provided, I came to understand that if we are to hold anything—and in times of sorrow we *must* have something to which we can cling—it must be to the unseen.

For the strength that is permanent, we have to lean on visions; for immortal hope,

we have to trust, not the things that we perceive but those invisible things that our spirits affirm.

I remember walking early one July morning down a thickety path. Trees completely overarched it; but far ahead light gleamed. The path was long and straight, and terminated in a wide meadow. As I glanced upward, my eye caught sight of what I supposed to be a knot on the end of a dead limb that hung directly over the pathway; it was clearly silhouetted against the sky line ahead. In a moment something had darted over my head and had alighted on the knot. It was a hummingbird on its nest, which hung like a fairy bassinet in the lonely woodland. I looked at the nest and at the bird, with its elfin grace, its delicate sheen of brilliance, its jeweled throat. And I thought: This whole matter of *grace,* of elegance, of delicacy and felicity of beauty is an extra. It is not necessary to have it so. But God has willed it so, because He loves us and knows our hungry hearts need this kind of beauty.

For many years, I had an idea that na-

ture had for man an active sympathy; but now I have changed my opinion. There seems really a superb indifference about na-

ture. It is what lies behind nature that really has sympathy. The rose does not of itself bloom for us; but God has made it to bloom for us. Surely this beauty is not a random affair; it is too authentically a sign and symbol of love. All we know about the highest form of affection we have learned directly from God's affection for us. We not only "love Him because He first loved us," but we love one another because He

teaches us how. We originate with Him; and our sublimist art is nothing but attempts to imitate the things in nature that He has created.

Whatever my religion may be worth, I feel deeply that life's extras have given it to me; and time shall not take it from me. Meditating on what we have, not merely to sustain us but to make us joyous and serene in life, I have come to so clear a consciousness of God that of all men the atheist appears to me the most pitiable and foolish. For how can any one, especially an intelligent person, acknowledging a created universe, deny a Creator It is like saying that some work of art is, indeed, great, but, after all, it just happened. The verdict of the atheist is, to put it legally, against the evidence. And not only is the hand of God manifest in nature all about us, but His spirit often makes the heart of man His dwelling place. In this dark empire of the earth, what is the lone infallible light that leads us ever on and ever upward It is the spirit of love; and the spirit of love is God. Nor have I come to this faith by roseate

paths alone. I know well the Valley of the Shadow; I know the aspect of that Veil which mortal sight cannot pierce. But I know, also, that the spiritual luxuries that we so freely enjoy vindicate the faith that behind the Veil is the God of mercy and of tenderest love.

PSALM VIII

1. O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens.

2. Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mighest still the enemy and the avenger.

3. When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;

4. What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

5. For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.

6. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet:

7. All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field;

8. The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas.

9. O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!

FINIS